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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the "brain drain" phenomenon particularly in the context of Chinese students studying in the United States and the People's Republic of China's attempts to respond. An opening section critiques the "brain drain" notion arguing that it is an inadequate construct for the actual flow of personnel and ideas between industrialized and developing nations. A further examination of the delayed return of Chinese students studying in the United States notes the changes since the Tiananmen Square incident which have caused many Chinese students in the United States to take a "wait and see" attitude to returning. The central section describes the Chinese government's efforts to combat the delayed return phenomenon through improved living and working conditions and selection for study abroad of advanced students and scholars who are already working and have ties to institutions or jobs in China. In a discussion of why Chinese students are not returning, the paper cites the government's fears that many are seeking business opportunities, and others observe that students are watching for changes in the political and economic conditions. A final section offers suggestions to ensure that students who are delaying return do not make that decision permanent. An appended newsletter article describes the Chinese Student Protection Act. (JB)

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The New China Syndrome: Delayed Return as a Viable Alternative to the "Brain Drain" Perspective

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1992

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The New China Syndrome:

Delayed Return as a Viable Alternative to the "Brain Drain" Perspective

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September 1992

Brain drain has been defined as the permanent loss of skilled or professional graduates who have emigrated to a more industrialized host country where they have received their education. The stereotype is that more developed host countries are "draining" the best talent from the sending countries by offering the international student graduates more money and personal incentives than they would receive back home. The data supporting a brain drain perspective often ignores the possibility of a student's delayed return. In some situations, such as The People's Republic of China, the possibility of a delayed return may be a viable and desirable alternative to brain drain for understanding the situation of Chinese students abroad.

Brain drain is an inadequate construct for several reasons. First, it treats delayed return as permanent nonreturn in compiling data. Second, it overemphasizes the migration of people from sending countries and underemphasizes the migration of ideas from receiving countries. Third, it is pejorative in assuming that nonreturn or delayed return is wrong and an exploitation by receiving countries. Fourth, it exploits the sensational slogan effect of the term "brain drain" at the expense of empirical data. Fifth, it creates a barrier to the exchange of students and ideas between sending and receiving countries. Sixth, it assumes a win/lose competitive relationship between sending and receiving countries.

Just how big is this issue of delayed return?

By 1990 there were between 32,000 and 45,000 Chinese students studying in the United States. Even at the height of Sino-Soviet relations, as a point of comparison, there were never more than about 500 Chinese students studying in the Soviet Union at any one time. The influx of Chinese students into the United States reflects a serious commitment to a Western style of education more than ever before,which has become apparent when those students return home. Between 1978 and 1988 approximately 12,500 students with J-1 visas and 7,000 students with F-1 visas returned to the People's Republic of China (Orleans, 1988, p. 13). Until recently there was no "brain drain" problem in China. Since the incident at Tienanmen Square however, there has been a great deal more concern. Tiananmen politicized international scientific and educational exchanges and coincided with social and ideological changes to polarize Western and non-Western perspectives in China. Chinese students in the United States have been granted special privileges to delay their return, in part at least out of sympathy for their welfare in the current crisis. Prior to the student demonstrations in the winter of 1986-87, virtually all the officially sponsored students and scholars returned to China after completing their studies. Now many Chinese students studying in the United States seem to be taking a "wait and see" attitude and are tending to delay their return to China.

Since 1978 the Peoples Republic of China has supported more than 90,000 students and scholars going abroad for research and studies but only about 40,000 have returned (Li Xing, 1991). The threat of a brain drain is particularly feared in the area of science and technology. Between 1982 and 1986 China and the United States jointly enrolled 915 of the best Chinese physics students to study in the United States and, according to Hou Xianglin in his address to the general meeting of the Seventh National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress, but only about 50 have returned. These changes have been compounded by (1) a lack of trust in Chinese leadership by students abroad, (2) a lack of advanced professional opportunities in modern China and (3) the increased popularity of a more self-centered perspective among young people in China.

Researchers between the ages of 36 and 45 made up 59 percent of the Chinese Academy of Science in 1978 but only 20 percent in 1988, according to a survey by the CPPCC's science and technology committee. Since 96 percent of university professors and 77 percent of the associate professors at Chinese universities are older than 51, there is danger of a shortage in university faculty in the next five years, should younger faculty leave the country, according to Li Xing (1991). The problem is that political considerations and officials are in control of the study abroad system, making faculty development considerations secondary. Universities will be less likely to risk sending abroad junior faculty—who were important supporters of the Democracy Movement—since many of those junior faculty are perceived as eager to escape tightening controls.

Those students who have already returned to China have been mostly "visiting scholars" who completed their studies in relatively short stays abroad. Few of the privately or self-financed students have come back and recently even government sponsored students working toward graduate degrees abroad have been requesting an extension of their stay abroad (Pedersen, et. al., 1991). There is a need for trained scientists and engineers, especially in many less prominent institutions, but foreign-trained scholars might not find these attractive. Leo A. Orleans (1991), who has written extensively on educational exchange with China, suggests that the need for scholars to return immediately is far from desperate, saying: "I belong to a small majority of observers who don't believe that at this time the loss of U.S. trained Ph.D.s creates a desperate situation for China—although it is a painful loss of face. (p.2)"

What is the Chinese government doing about delayed returns?

As a result of the delayed return of students studying abroad China has tended to encourage study abroad only in applied fields, decreased undergraduate or masters level quotas and increased the number of older students studying for the doctorate. China is encouraging students to return from abroad by setting up post-doctorate research stations across the country and a National Service Center to assist the returned student. There is also a tendency to send students to Europe, New Zealand, Australia, or Japan rather than the United States, presumably out of fear that students sent to the United States will be less likely to return home after completing their studies. New regulations are now being developed to enforce these safeguards against brain drain (Pedersen, et. al., 1991).

Western "thinking" and theories of development present a threat to traditional Chinese socialism. Western aid-giving countries have tended to assume that genuine modernization will ultimately mean China's becoming "more like us" (Hayhoe, 1992, p.9). Modernization will result in changes favorable to foreign trained intellectuals now waiting to return from abroad. Richard Suttmeir (1988) believes China is going through a fundamental and irreversible transformation in it's attitude toward knowledge and it's use which will favor westernized intellectuals. Many of these western trained intellectuals will eventually return from abroad because of loyalties to China, disillusionment with the United States or out of attraction to professional opportunities and when they do they will be better prepared to contribute because of their delayed return, at least from a westernized perspective.

The Chinese government has tried a variety of methods to increase the likelihood of students returning home after study abroad.

• First, the responsibility for selecting students to go abroad has been shifted to individual work units, requiring signed contracts between the individual and the unit assigning responsibilities and sometimes requiring a guarantor.

• Second, graduates from Chinese universities are routinely required to work for two years before going abroad for an advanced degree.

• Third, there is a concerted effort to improve the living and working conditions for all intellectuals.

• Fourth, there has been a tendency to prefer advanced students and scholars rather than undergraduates as candidates for study abroad, except in language study and specialized areas.

Paul Ong and his colleagues (1991) point out that everybody potentially benefits from the migration of highly skilled and talented graduates. The effective transfer of technology requires an exchange of ideas and people. If graduates who remain abroad create a problem for sending countries the graduates who return home create a problem through a "brain drain" of ideas from the country where they studied, linking both sending and receiving countries in fundamental ways. Since the mid-sixties the migration of talent has been much more fluid and two-directional with migrants going back and forth. Whether the graduates stay abroad, return home or delay their return home need not diminish their contributions at home and abroad.

What are the Chinese students abroad waiting for?

There is much concern in the People's Republic of China for the younger graduate students now completing their studies abroad, many of whom are not married or attached to a work unit. There is an expectation that these students will continue to delay their return to China for an extended period of time. There is a fear of what Leo Orleans (1989) calls "business fever" among Chinese students at home and abroad for whom "the good life" of professional and personal affluence has become a high priority.

Li Xing (1991) reports on a survey by the Beijing Statistics Bureau on the work and income of government employees in relation to their educational background. This survey identified some of the problems which might contribute to a brain drain.

- First, government employees with a college or university education earn only about 83 percent the life income of their peers with a junior middle school or lower level of education.

- Second, some young instructors at Beijing University do not have an apartment of their own even after ten years of marriage and there is a severe housing shortage.

- Third, there is little opportunity for the young professional academic to be promoted, prompting them to look for opportunities abroad.

- Fourth, since many research institutes and universities are overstaffed, even graduates with Ph.D. and Masters degrees find it hard to get a job in their field.

- Fifth, research institutes in the natural sciences have been unable to update their equipment in recent years because of diminished funding.

There is a concern in the P.R.C. that monetary gain rather than ideology has become the motivating force among students abroad who would be willing to sacrifice national interests to their own individual interests. There is a further concern that liberalized attitudes are conducive to increased professional opportunities but that these attitudes have also led to unrealistic expectations by the Chinese intellectuals (Orleans, 1988).

The CPPCC members have made several proposals, according to Li Xing (1991) regarding changes that are needed.

- First of all the proposals pointed out that the State needs to carry out its promise of "respecting knowledge and respecting the talented" by improving the living standards of educated professionals.

- Second, the State needs to ensure that research institutes, universities and institutes employing returned scholars have enough funding to improve their research, teaching and practice facilities.

- Third, the State needs to make sure that repair and supply companies are providing efficient and adequate services to scientific research institutes.

- Fourth, the state should help remove obstacles to promotion and advancement by young professionals.

M. Patricia Needle (1991) contends that Chinese students and scholars want to return to China if economic and political conditions become favorable. Since these students now have the option to remain in the United States for several years they choose to delay any permanent decision to return home until conditions become more favorable. This is the perspective of Shui Chen (1991), a

Chinese student studying in the United States who believes that China should focus on holding on to the "hearts" rather than the "bodies" of Chinese students abroad, promoting a sense of mission and conviction for a "better China" in the future. If the knowledge and contribution of foreign-trained intellectuals was respected so that they felt less helpless and powerless their motivation to return would be greatly enhanced. Shui Chen does not believe that economic or even political factors are as important as this opportunity to contribute. The Chinese students abroad may contribute to a better China even while remaining overseas. While the students abroad may be disappointed by many events in China they are loyal to China as their homeland and will help promote modernization of China in any way they can. Shui Chen believes that a delayed return of the Chinese students abroad may, in the long run, be a blessing rather than a curse for China.

What should be done about the "delayed return" students?

Chinese students waiting to return home want some assurances that (l) they can use the skills they learned abroad, (2) that they will be free to pursue their research interests, (3) that they can stay in contact with their colleagues in other countries, and (4) that they will have an income comparable to what their colleagues are receiving. Most if not all Chinese students want to return home eventually and contribute to the modernization of China as well as a better understanding between China and other countries. Research by Ruth Hayhoe and Sun Yilin (1989) indicates that the relatively small number of younger scholars who have returned in recent years have been under-utilized in their teaching and research roles. The underlying problem is in changes going in China itself, through a reassessment of standards for evaluating knowledge and scholarship throughout institutional structures that protect those standards. When and if conditions in China make it possible for foreign trained graduates to make a meaningful contribution, they will return. Until and unless the opportunity for making a meaningful contribution is made available to the Chinese students they are likely to delay their return still further.

The brain drain issues of P.R.C. students are not so different from the same issue for students from other countries. The home country needs to create a climate for attracting and retaining talent. This means improving the living and working conditions of professionals and helping them "shine and grow" in their jobs (Chopra, 1986, p.57). In studying the reentry adjustment of Chinese students from The Republic of China, Pedersen, et.al. (1991) discovered several patterns that might apply to Chinese students from the P.R.C. as well.

- First, satisfaction with the living and working environment is an important factor in promoting a successful reentry for some students but not for others. It seems that personal and professional satisfaction by itself is not a good predictor of successful reentry for Chinese students. This would contradict the stereotyped presumption that students would remain abroad to protect their private self interests.

- Second, returnees expect some extrinsic rewards beyond knowledge alone when they go abroad to study. Some of these rewards include enhanced worth of the degree, a good career, practical experience in a specialized field, prestige of study abroad and respect from society. These factors have already been identified as significant in the P.R.C. and specific action is being taken to make the necessary changes.

• Third, ideological reasons are extremely important in determining successful reentry. Most returnees say they returned because of patriotism, obligations to family, feelings of strangeness or discrimination abroad, potential contributions to their profession or family influence. Fears that the new liberalism in the P.R.C. will erode the student's loyalty do not seem justified by these data. Loyalty to the family and to China is a profoundly important factor for deciding to return home even among Chinese students outside of the P.R.C.

• Fourth, the external influence of family, friends and the environment are extremely important. Those returnees who were more internally oriented were more likely to stay after their return home than those influenced by "powerful others" or externally oriented. It may be that the very students identified now as "trouble-makers" abroad are the ones most highly motivated to return home, given the opportunity, while the more conformist and complaint students are more likely to remain abroad.

• Fifth, other research on reentry relates return rates to economic development back home, employment opportunities, the extent of social support, the source of sponsorship (public or private) and other circumstantial factors. In some specialized areas there may not be opportunities for graduates to return home. They may better serve China by remaining abroad and enhancing their expertise for return at some future time when the opportunity arises. Chinese students abroad are like a bank account of talent for China, which accumulates interest in the form of increased expertise and from which the country can make withdrawals at some future time as appropriate.

Countries with higher rates of brain drain have frequently experienced rapid development while countries with a lower rate of brain drain have developed more slowly. Other literature points out positive benefits of talent migration (Glaser, 1978). Migration channels excess manpower to countries where it can be utilized, facilitates the transfer of technology, enhances the production of educational knowledge, strengthens ties between countries, provides income remittances to home countries and benefits to the individual migrants (Buck, 1980).

Whether the present situation of "delayed return" will result in a permanent "brain drain" is still unclear. Whether the delayed return of Chinese students will eventually have a positive effect on modern China is still not certain. What is clear is the need to develop a "brain plan" to create opportunities so that Chinese students abroad can make a meaningful contribution. To the extent that Chinese students abroad are perceived as a "political" problem rather than a problem in effective manpower utilization the issue will become more emotional and the possibility of a constructive solution will diminish. Until China and Chinese students abroad recognize their "common ground" and shared interests the issue of delayed return will continue to be controversial.

Chinese Student Protection Act Becomes Law

(reprinted from NAFSA's Government Affairs Bulletin, December/January 1992, p. 1)

After extensive lobbying by Chinese student advocates, Congress passed the Chinese Student Protection Act on September 23. The act, allowing nationals of the People's Republic of China (PRC) covered by the executive order that expires January 1, 1994 to adjust to permanent resident status unless the President certifies that they can safely return to the PRC, was signed by President Bush on October 9 (Public Law No. 102-404).

President Bush issued the executive order in April 1990 to allow PRC nationals in the United States to remain in the country and work until January 1,1994 in response to the June 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. The new law covers any alien who: 1) is a national of the PRC described in the 1990 executive order (i.e. all PRC nationals and their dependents who were in the U.S. on or after June 5 1989 up until April 11, 1990, regardless of whether they were ever in status); 2) has resided continuously in the U.S. since April 11, 1990 except for "brief, casual and innocent absences;" and 3) was not physically present in the PRC for longer than 90 days between April 11, 1990 and October 9, 1992.

For purposes of the new law, such an alien will be deemed to have had a petition approved for classification under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) Sec. 203(b)(3)(A)(i) - the employment based third preference "skilled workers" category. Such an application will be considered regardless of whether an immigrant visa number is immediately available at the time the application is filed. In addition, the new law waives the need for a labor certification (sec. 212(a)(5)) and the grounds of exclusion based on no valid visa or passport (Sec. 212(a)(7)(A)), and renders inapplicable the two-year home country residence requirement (Sec. 212(e)). The legislation also allows the Attorney General discretion to waive most other grounds of exclusion. Further, the new law specifies that neither the per-country numerical limits of INA Sec 202(a)(2) nor the maintenance of lawful status provisions of INA Sec 245 (c) applies.

The presumption that individuals who were able to remain in the PRC for at least 90 days after April 11, 1990 could safely reside there may disqualify some otherwise eligible PRC nationals. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) is expected to attempt to verify this requirement at the time of the adjustment interview by reviewing the alien's passport and asking, under oath, about travel during the eligibility period.

Assuming the President does not certify that conditions in the PRC allow for safe return, the application period for adjustment of status will begin on July 1, 1993 and run for one year. To accommodate the 70-80,000 PRC nationals who are expected to file for adjustments, the act provides for a 1000 annual reduction in the per-country numerical levels for the PRC. However, as long as the skilled worker category for the PRC remains oversubscribed and thus subject to INA Sec. 202(e) prorating, 300 numbers will be deemed to have been previously issued under INA Sec. 202(b)(3)(A)(i) - skilled workers, and 700 under INA 203(b)(5) - immigrant investors, from the PRC allotment.

As with any new immigration related legislation, there are a number of grey areas which are expected to be addressed by the INS regulations. One particularly complicated area of the law is that relating to the numerical limits. According to INS and the Department of State, PRC nationals will be charged to the world wide availability date for third preference skilled workers (EB-3). Although immigrant visas are currently available to aliens from most countries in that category (N.B. although the PRC is oversubscribed for this category, this cut off date does not apply to aliens eligible for adjustment under the new law), this could pose problems as the application period progresses.

In its November Visa Bulletin, the State Department indicates that the worldwide EB-3 category will become oversubscribed sometime late in 1993. If this occurs, a cut-off date for PRC applicants eligible under the new law will have to be established and INS will have to define a priority date for this unique program. This, in turn, may mean even longer waits for EB-3 visa applicants from other countries. Questions of advance parole for travelling outside the country during this period will also have to be addressed.

Another question revolves around whether the dependents of an eligible PRC national who arrived after the executive order took effect (and are therefore themselves not covered by the executive order) will be eligible to apply for adjustment of status under the new law. Future issues of the Bulletin will summarize any information as it becomes available and the INS regulations when they are published.

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